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Personna starts a cut-throat war

BY ROGER LEWIS

APART FROM some brief, sporadic outbursts from Wilkinson Sword and Gillette contesting one another's claims on the British market, it has been all quiet on the razor blade front so far this year. But this uneasy calm is about to be shattered.

Early next month if all goes to plan a new advertising campaign by the Philip Morris offshoot, Ever-Ready Personna, will erupt in the national Press, a scheme designed to "shock the public into awareness of Personna." If nothing else, it will certainly shock Personna's competitors—for it will mark the arrival of "knocking copy" on the cut-throat British razor blade promotion scene.

Personna's agents, Dunkley and Friedlander, are playing a clever tack by reproducing advertisements used in America which actually named names, stating, quite blatantly, which was the best of Personna, Wilkinson and Gillette blades. The only difference is that in Britain they will carry the banner. "Of course you couldn't run an ad like this in Britain."

A second advertisement, which looks like knocking Personna's rivals even harder, is now being scrutinised by legal experts.

Personna's bold assault from a position of supposed insignificance in the British market has been prompted by the results of an intensive two-year independent consumer research programme. "This survey," explains marketing director Ray Dallow, "indicated to us that we have a very great opening in the blade business." Dallow, who joined Personna in January this year after 12 years with Colgate-Palmolive (where he put Ajax on the map) and three with Steiner International, plans to back up his advertising with below-the-line promotion that will involve the distribution of a staggering 12 million free sample blades over the next year.

Nearly three million samples went out with tins of Tom Thumb cigars a few months ago. Now the Total oil company has been recruited to give blades away (from next week) with every four gallons of petrol purchased, and six other "major" companies will eventually be brought into the operation. With its low rate of media expenditure, Personna can afford such extravagance

Sally Soames

Personna's Ray Dallow (left) and deputy managing director Tom Goodale (right) watch one of their staff testing their product

vision advertising amounted to only £60,500, compared with Gillette's £634,000 and Wilkinson's £695,000. And in the first four months of this year Personna's advertising bill stood at only £40,000, against £310,000 for Gillette and £369,000 for Wilkinson.

Still, the latest claims from Gillette and Wilkinson appear to leave Personna with scant room for manoeuvre. Gillette currently insists that it accounts for 52.3 per cent of all blade sales (stainless and carbon), Wilkinson for 36.6 per cent and Personna for 4.3 per cent. The stainless steel market, says Gillette, is shared almost equally by itself and Wilkinson, though the addition of stainless Seven O'clock probably gives Gillette a slight "edge." Wilkinson has a slightly different version. It claims 49.5 per cent of the total double-edged market in terms of users, and 44.2 per cent in units; in stainless, the figures are 52 per cent users and 50.4 per cent units.

On this basis, Personna, along with Schick and others has a nil share of the stainless double-edge market—which accounts for 80 per cent of all blade sales. But Dallow is not one to be deterred by market claims of the [illegible] brand leaders [illegible] up claim, we know," he says. "We know we command over 16 per cent. of the total razor blade market in this country and we have statistics from independent research organisations to prove it." Gillette certainly concedes that its 4.3 per cent. estimate for Personna is probably on the low side, because the latter also supplies own-label blades to certain multiples.

Dallow's claims may be shrugged off by the giants but they can not be ignored. Not two years ago Personna claimed only 7 per cent. of the double-edged market and thus reckons to have more than doubled its share. And for what they are worth, Personna can produce figures from "highly regarded" independent research firms that show sales of its Super Stainless blade now running ahead of one of the brand leaders in at least one major supermarket chain, a magnificent achievement since 52 per cent. of razor blades are sold through grocery outlets.

Personna's target, in fact, is 25 per cent. of total U K sales within the next two years and eventual equilibrium with the leaders. Wind of this challenge has already breezed into the Wilkinson and Gillette camps and [illegible] with a new blade but with its first razor (why Wilkinson never jumped into razors and shaving cream when it had the stainless steel lead will always remain a mystery).

A new Wilkinson blade, claimed to have involved a "new concept in terms of blade manufacture" was developed some two years ago, but it was never launched. "Pre-production of the new blade was excellent," says deputy chairman Roy Randolph, "but when put into mass production the reject rate was too high so we postponed it." Is the blade now ready for its debut? Randolph's only comment last week was: "If we were about to launch a new product we would let you know."

Philip Morris's bid for (what amounts to) effective control of the Gallaher cigarette group has also aroused interest if not caused concern among the two dominant blade companies. P M's reply to one of the seven questions from Gallaher about its future intentions was that it "would not expect the Gallaher organisation to sell or distribute in the U K Philip Morris non-tobacco products, whether imported or produced in the U K." Does this rule out marketing and the distribution of free

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